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## 3 former U.S. envoys blast bill on POW reparations Critics say measure could weaken U.S.-Japan ties

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With the United States seeking Japan's help in fighting terrorism, a little-known measure in Congress to help former World War II prisoners of war sue Japanese corporations has suddenly become a political powder keg.

Critics of the measure say it could undermine U.S.-Japan relations at a time when the United States is depending on support from an important ally. In the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Japan contributed \$13 billion, a major part of the total cost.

Last week, three previous U.S. ambassadors to Japan -- former Vice President Walter Mondale, former Speaker of the House Thomas Foley and Brookings Institution President Michael Armacost -- wrote an unusual joint column for the Washington Post saying the measure "would undermine our relations with Japan, a key ally. It would have serious, and negative, effects on our national security."

The three former envoys said the measure, which won overwhelming approval in both houses of Congress and is now in conference committee, would abrogate the Treaty of Peace that ended World War II, a treaty they called "the cornerstone of U.S. security arrangements in the Pacific."

The Bush administration and Japanese government also have opposed the measure, saying war reparations were settled by the treaty.

"Why would Congress consider passing a law that could abrogate a treaty so fundamental to our security at a time the president and his administration are trying so hard to forge a coalition to combat terrorism?" the ambassadors wrote.

Each house of Congress approved the POW measure, an amendment to a spending bill, before the terrorist attacks.

Spearheaded by California Reps. Mike Honda, a San Jose Democrat and Japanese American, and Dana Rohrabacher, R-Huntington Beach, the amendment won approval in the House of Representatives on a 395-to-33 vote in July.

Senate approval, on a 58-to-34 vote, came after emotional debate on Sept. 10, one day before hijacked planes smashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The amendment supports lawsuits filed under a 1999 California law by survivors of the Bataan Death March and other ex-POWs seeking damages for the brutal treatment they suffered as forced laborers for Japanese corporations.

The State and Justice departments interceded in the cases and helped persuade U.S. District Judge Vaughn Walker in San Francisco to reject the suits on grounds that the Peace Treaty had settled the

The POW amendment seeks to bar the State and Justice departments from further participation in the lawsuits.

The Bush administration's strong opposition to the measure promises a difficult showdown with Congress. The measure is an amendment to the annual spending bill for the Departments of State, Justice and Commerce and cannot be vetoed without vetoing the entire appropriations bill.

On the same day the ambassadors' column was published last Tuesday, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi met with President Bush to offer logistical support to the United States and \$40 million in aid to Pakistan. Japan is debating whether to dispatch warships for noncombat roles.

Ernest Baynard, a spokesman for Honda, said the amendment "does not abrogate our treaty with Japan." He said U.S.-Japan relations could be improved if the POW issue were resolved.

Satoru Satoh, spokesman for the Japanese Embassy in Washington, called the ambassadors' column excellent and said the Japanese government was "not in agreement with the amendment." However, he said, the amendment and Japan's "firm determination to fight against terrorism . . . are different issues."

Yoshihisa Komori, editor-at-large for Japan's conservative Sankei newspaper,

said the amendment "would probably strengthen the position" of "those who have had reservations about cooperating with the United States."

Edward Jackfert, past national commander of the veterans group American Defenders of Bataan & Corregidor, branded the ambassadors' column "deceptive" and "totally unfounded." He said the veterans were "deeply disappointed that our government is resisting our efforts to obtain justice from those Japanese corporations that utilized us as slave laborers."

Mondale, Foley and Armacost expressed sympathy for the POWs and called the congressional effort well-intentioned, but they also said that POWs had been paid reparations from seized Japanese assets under the War Claims Act and that Congress could pay the POWs more if it wished.

The amounts POWs received are disputed, and records are incomplete.

California's two Democratic senators were split on the amendment. Dianne Feinstein opposed it during the Sept. 10 debate, saying she supported the POW lawsuits but also believed the State and Justice departments should be allowed to offer their opinions in court. Barbara Boxer voted in support.

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